

Lewis and Clark

At the Falls of the Ohio

Story by Dr. Charles E. White

AFTER arriving in Louisville, Ky., on Oct. 14, 1803, CPT Meriwether Lewis hired local pilots to guide the keelboat safely through a daunting set of rapids known as the “Falls of the Ohio,” and then a short distance further to Clarksville, Indiana Territory.

Once there, Lewis set off to meet his co-captain, William Clark, who was living with his older brother, BG George Rogers Clark.

During the next 12 days, they recruited members for the expedition. Word had spread throughout the Ohio Valley, and young men longing for adventure set out for Clarksville to sign up. The two captains judged these volunteers on their overall physical strength and endurance, their foraging and hunting skills, and their ability to make or repair the gear needed for the long journey to the Pacific coast and back.

Lewis and Clark eventually selected nine from the unknown number of volunteers. They were SGTs Charles Floyd and Nathaniel Pryor, and PVTs William Bratton, John Colter, Joseph and Reubin Field, George Gibson, George Shannon and John Shields. Colter and Shannon had already joined Lewis before he had reached Cincinnati. These volunteers became known as “The Nine Young Men from Kentucky.”

In a ceremony on Oct. 20, 1803, Lewis and Clark enlisted the nine new soldiers who would form the nucleus of the Corps of Discovery.


Floyd and Pryor were first cousins and exceptional leaders. Lewis regarded Floyd as “a young man of much merit,” while he and Clark considered Pryor “a man of character and ability.” Lewis wrote in his final report that the Field brothers

were “two of the most active and enterprising young men who accompanied us.” They were among the best shots and hunters, and were routinely chosen to accompany the captains on special reconnaissance missions.

Shields was the oldest member of the expedition, and his skills as a blacksmith, gunsmith and carpenter were invaluable. Lewis recommended that Congress give

Shields a bonus for his services.

In addition to the nine new recruits, Clark also decided to bring along his slave York, who carried a rifle and performed his full share of duties with the other members of the expedition.

The expedition left the Falls on Oct. 26, 1803, and headed down-river to Fort Massac in southern Illinois Territory. 

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Falls of the Ohio



Tropic of Cancer